

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 February 2020



The Problem with ‘Religion’ (and related categories)

Podcast with **Timothy Fitzgerald** (17 February 2020).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-problem-with-religion-and-related-categories/>

David Robertson (DR): *I'm joined today by [Timothy Fitzgerald](#), returning to the Religious Studies Project after a few years. Tim is originally from the UK but now based in Brisbane, where he is a Visiting Research Professor at the University of Queensland in the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities. He's one of the most prominent figures in the critical study of religion. And this interview is taking place at the 20 years since the publication of [The Ideology of Religious Studies](#) – which was a kind-of watershed text in the emergence of the critical religion. And the approach that we, at the RSP, have been pushing since day one, I guess. So first of all, Tim - welcome back to the Religious Studies Project, and thanks for making the time.*

Timothy Fitzgerald (TF): Thanks for inviting me. It's good to be with you.

DR: *It's been difficult to get this interview arranged, so I'm glad that it's finally happening! Let's start assuming that the Listener probably hasn't read [The Ideology of Religious Studies](#) – or may not have read [The Ideology of Religious Studies](#). Let's start with a little bit of your back story. How did you get there from, you know, your first degree in RS – the same way that we all sort-of start, with whichever religion we decide to specialise in – how did you get there?*

TF: Yes, well there are different possible starting points, but I agree the degree in Religious Studies that I did at Kings College London is a good place to start. I did that degree in '75-'77, and it was a really good degree. I learnt a lot from it. I'm glad I did it. It was well-taught. It was well-organised in a lot of ways. And it was all about religion, right? So we had eight or nine courses that lasted over the period of three years: three of them were in the philosophy of religion, one was in anthropology of religion, one in sociology of religion, one in psychology of religion. And then, in addition, we had to

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study two world religions. The world religions model was very well established, obviously, at that time. And that was in the mid-seventies. [Ninian Smart](#) was very prominent, and the whole sort-of Religious Studies education scene was pretty much dominated by the world religions model, as you know. Now, we did all of these studies of religion and one issue which came up for me was the question of what religion actually means. . . what it referred to. Because you know in a lot of the sub-disciplines – like the anthropology of religion, or the philosophy of religion – there's a sort of genre of writing concerned with defining what religion is. And one of the things that struck me – and I suppose anybody else who read these different approaches to the definition of religion – one of the things that struck me was that there were so much room for disagreement. That basically the meaning of religion, the referent of religion was thoroughly contested. But that didn't lead anybody to question whether we should have departments of Religious Studies focussed on researching a term which cannot be defined, and about which there is such a degree of (laughs) conflict or contestation. So that was really what I came out of Kings College London with. That was a very valuable thing. I think, in a way, one could say that the degree was successful because it taught me how to reflect critically. And – lo and behold! – I was reflecting critically on the very category that was at the heart of all of these studies that we were reading.

DR: *Well, despite the sort-of prominence of Ninian Smart's approach, it sounds like it was actually quite a methodological, or at least theoretical, undergraduate course (5:00) – much more so than you would find in most places nowadays, I think – with this sort-of . . . an entire course on the philosophy of religion, and entire course on the psychology of religion. You know, I don't think courses look like that anymore.*

TF: Right. Well it was good, yes. I enjoyed it. And I got a huge amount We did a lot of philosophy and, for example, we did philosophy in the sense of history of ideas, but it involved looking at particular writers, particular thinkers in some depth – and this was very much the sort-of Anglo-American analytical side of philosophy. We didn't study any of the . . . we didn't study many of the French or German philosophers. Of course [Wittgenstein](#) was very important, and one of the ways in which philosophers of religion and many others have tried to find a solution to this definitional problem is through Wittgenstein's [language games](#), and the idea that the meaning of a word comes from its uses. Those are important insights, but they don't actually for me solve the definitional problem. And in fact I've had quite extended arguments about this with people like [Benson Saler](#), who's a great defender of Wittgenstein's [family resemblance](#) kind-of approach to defining the meaning of words. But I think it has problems. So *The Ideology of Religious Studies* includes a great deal of

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argument about the way that Wittgenstein's arguments are used to find a solution to the definitional problem.

DR: *Well, hopefully we can get to that later on. I want to kind-of walk the Listener to there. Because I think, actually, the story of how you got there is quite interesting in itself. So we talked before about when you started looking at Buddhism and Hinduism, after your PhD, that the lack of referent in the category of religion, it began to hit home. You began to get some sort-of clear historical examples of that.*

TF: Yes. I got a job in a college of higher education – Hertfordshire College of Higher Education – in 1980. It was my first full-time job. And one of my responsibilities was to teach Hinduism and Buddhism. And when I joined we had two degrees. One was the Education degrees . . . one was the Education degree for teachers. So there were a lot . . . it was a teacher training college originally, I think. And then there was a new BA in Humanities, of which the Study of Religion provided some pretty substantial segments . . . courses. So I was teaching on those two. And I mean the students would ask me . . . I was teaching Hinduism and Buddhism as a world religion, but feeling very uncomfortable with it. Because I could see the problems. And they're vast essentialisations, aren't they, based on texts, or on edited and selected versions of texts? And the idea of Hinduism is taught very much in the sort-of history of ideas fashion – or used to be. So, there's a whole series of dates that you need to learn. And you need to learn the basic doctrines. But one thing that this complex construct Hinduism, taught as a religion, doesn't do is to explain the wider context in which these abstracted textual references and concepts exist. And, of course, caste is a particularly problematic term (10:00). If you read world religion text books you will get references about Hinduism, you'll constantly get references to caste, but nobody explains it properly. What is caste? It's presented as though it's a kind-of religious injunction on the division of labour, or something. It's not . . . the actual way in which caste operates is not really explained. And in order to find that out you have to go into anthropology. So I was reading a huge amount of anthropology to supplement my world religion experience. Because anthropologists . . . and sometimes anthropologists are also interested in history. But the point is that anthropologists actually go and try and come into contact with this abstraction caste. And at that time, particularly [Louis Dumont](#) – who wrote the classic book *Homo Hierarchicus* – he dominated the field of Indian anthropology. But there were lots of other important anthropologists – [Srinivas](#), for example. But I read a lot of anthropology. And this was in response, after all, to my students' demands. Because, actually, a lot of the students were thinking in very practical ways – and perfectly legitimately. They weren't really interested in the doctrine of salvation according to the

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[Brihadaranyaka Upanishad](#). They were interested in why women wear a mark in their forehead, or how marriages happen, or what different people eat. They wanted to know about the actual practicalities of the village economy. How does caste actually operate within a village community? And these are very . . . further questions that I would be asked would be: how can caste operate in huge cities, like Bombay and Delhi, where there are so many people? Surely your caste identity simply gets lost? These kinds of practical and interesting questions. And here was I, teaching Hinduism and Buddhism – but I'd never even been to India! And that just seemed to me to be wrong. So I organised a research trip. It wasn't brilliantly well organised. But basically, my research was going to be on caste, untouchability and the effect of colonial institutions. And whether the improvements and progress of liberal political economy had really helped to liberate people from the caste system. And one particular Indian leader was drawn to my attention, and that was [Dr BR Ambedkar](#). And Ambedkar became a real source of great interest to me. So I managed to go to India for four months in the 1980s. I got some money together and I just spent four months in India, meeting people, and just trying to understand what India looks like, smells like, feels like.

DR: *I know that you've got an interest in [Mary Douglas'](#) work. And talking about caste there, I immediately start thinking of purity, and danger, and ideas of cleanliness. And I don't know if she's . . . I know her ideas are applicable so much wider than simply talking about religions. And certainly the way that these – kind-of well-discussed, being the obvious thing – but, “in-group” and “out-group” structures are kind-of ritualised but mystified in cultures.*

TF: Yes.

DR: *It immediately jumps to mind. And I know that you're a fan of hers. So was that where you got to her work, as well?*

TF: At first I was getting it more from Louis Dumont, who also really belonged to the French school of sociology: L'École Sociologique. He was a [Durkheimian](#) in many ways, as was Mary Douglas (15:00). And Durkheim had been a big influence on me when I was doing my degree at Kings College London. And for a long time I thought of myself, in a sense, as a Durkheimian. And I read Dumont through a Durkheimian perspective. But Dumont was very much putting the purity/pollution binary as the kind-of definition – almost the central characteristic – of the caste system. So you get the Brahmins as pure, and the Untouchables as impure. And a whole number of other castes in between, sort-of lining up in relative degrees of purity and pollution. And it's a very useful way of looking at it. Of course, there was huge debate about these things in Indian anthropology and sociology. But I think

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nobody would doubt that Dumont's picking on this binary is the sort-of outside limits of what could be thought in terms of social or human relations, rather. But, yes, Mary Douglas came hot on the heels, after Louis Dumont, as one of the people that I read, and one of the people that I have really enjoyed teaching. I think she's been generally really helpful. One point that I would like to make, actually – since we're talking about Durkheim, Dumont, Mary Douglas, I think you can see a kind of progressive move from the sort-of empirical ethnographic approach to sociology or anthropology towards the idea of . . . well, I'm calling them signalling systems. What Durkheim meant by a totemic system, or a system of collective representations. What I think you get in all of these writers is a move towards reading signs and their relationships as being the fundamental point of understanding anybody's collective life.

DR: *Would you agree that it's maybe a progress from a structuralist into a poststructuralist view?*

TF: Well, yes. I think so. But, I mean, Dumont is usually considered to be a structuralist. And I think that's one of the reasons why people don't read him very much now. Or they don't seem to. But I think his work is actually very subtle in a lot of ways. And it's very rich. He also wrote, as well as *Homo Hierarchicus*, he also wrote a book . . . Well, he wrote [From Mandeville to Marx](#). And he also wrote a collection of essays called [Essays on Individualism](#), where he tried to show how, whereas in India the individual is always outside the world, structurally speaking and symbolically speaking, in the European Christian traditions the individual started off as outside the world but moved to become the in-worldly individual, basically as a result of modern capitalism. Or as a characteristic of modern capitalism. Whereas individuals used to sort-of go to the desert and separate themselves from the rest of the main body of humanity, in the search for salvation or some kind-of self-discovery – you know, you think of those hermits and renouncers in early Christian Europe, and they've existed all the way through . . . Well in India you get a very, very ancient tradition of renunciation, where people symbolically . . . where people renounce their family (20:00), their village, their family name, their normal activities, clothes, profession, and really, in a sense, become a living non-person: they perform their own cremation, symbolically, by cremating their old clothes and various symbols of their previous life; so they become an out-worldly individual. They become an individual because they separated themselves from the collective, symbolically and physically. And they've now become something rather special, and sacred, and powerful by moving out of the normal collective which in India would be very much about caste, caste membership – moving out of that, and becoming a kind-of individual. Actually, most renouncers in India join [ashrams](#). They belong to some kind of an organisation. They often have a guru. But nevertheless, Dumont was reading this at the symbolic level:

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that this is a move from identity defined by the collective, to a kind-of out-worldly identity. An individual identity. So his story was that, as a result of the Reformation, and then developments of various forms of [Calvinism](#) –where there was a very strong emphasis on the lonely individual working in the world – so the individual becomes, instead of being an out-worldly value, becomes the central in-worldly value of modern capitalist society. I think that’s an interesting way of looking at it.

DR: *Very much so. After your research on India and teaching at the higher education college, you then moved to Japan for three years. And again, there’s another kind-of shift in your work there. So tell us about that.*

TF: Yes, sure. Well, just as India had really shocked me and given me a different perspective on the world and also on myself. . . . I think it's quite important – not for egotistical reasons – but it's quite important to realise that one has internalised a great deal of shared common symbolic life which constructs our individuality. And that, when you move out of that shared symbolic life, your consciousness is quite vulnerable and you change a lot. Some people call it culture shock. But it's to do with a reorientation of values. Well, going to Japan was even more like that because Japan is completely different from India and is very different from Britain. And going to Japan to live, this is because I met Noriko my wife, who’s Japanese, in London. And we had our first, our son, James – he was born in London. But then we almost immediately went to Japan, because I'd been offered a job there. And you know, her father was asking me to go and live in Japan for a while. He didn't want to lose his daughter to a foreigner, which was perfectly understandable. (Laughs). Just suddenly disappear to London and never be seen again! So I was lucky, I was invited to a university in Japan called Aichi Gakuin, which was in Nagoya. And I had to do a lot of English teaching. But I did also have a status as a research academic. Yes, working in Japan, I had to very quickly start learning Japanese, because I didn't know a word of Japanese when I went there! And I was there for several years. And it was very . . . it was hugely valuable. I mean my children are bilingual. They still speak Japanese with their mother. My Japanese was never fully fluent, but by the time I left I could more than survive there. You know, for the last six or seven years I was living there alone because Noriko and the children had gone back to London. And that was a fantastic impetus for me. And I went there when I was over forty, I ought to add. I was forty years old when I first went to Japan.

DR: *And I can vouch that, in your forties, trying to learn a new language is not easy! (25:00)*

TF: No. Not at all. Especially when it's a non-European one. But I did learn a huge amount. And I've never regretted that. I regret that I couldn't enter into academic debates with Japanese. That was just

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too a stretch too far. You really need to be trained in Japanese language from an earlier age and do it thoroughly. But never the less, I learned so much. And I tell you one of the main things it did was to re-orientate me, as I was explaining about India. It doesn't mean to say that I idealised Japan. I was a big critic of Japan as a foreigner, living in Japan, but at the same time there are lots of things I really admired about the way Japanese people do things, the way they organised There a lots of things that I learnt from being in Japan.

DR: *One important one, though, I think is the idea of translating categories. Japan certainly in conversations I have in RS, it's very useful as an example where the idea of religion in the way that we think of it generally just doesn't really work. And yet they've been kind-of forced to take it on to some degree as a result of colonial forces in the 19th century particularly. And yet, our Western hegemonic classifications don't really map onto Japanese society very well. Would that be fair to say?*

TF: Yes I think that is fair. I think it's true, and in fact that's been one of the themes of quite a lot of published work on Japan, my own published work. You know, just to give you a practical example, when I was teaching English in the universities – it was really boring by the way, because most of the Japanese didn't want to learn English, and I don't blame them. Why should they? They're perfectly happy speaking their own language. But also it's the way that English is taught, or languages in general are taught in Japan. And so I found myself teaching a large class of twenty or thirty students who were sitting in absolutely straight lines, desks in straight lines. They would often self-gender. So you'd get the men sitting on one side of the room and the women on the other. Not always, but they'd quite often do that. It was a bit like an extension of the Japanese school system – very disciplined. You don't ever question the teacher. And basically, the teacher is there to speak and the students are there to listen. It's very difficult under those circumstances to have a conversation class, as they jokingly used to call them. But, because I was trying to develop confidence in speaking Japanese, I used to sometimes try to start a conversation in an English class in Japanese, which was a shocking experience for my students: (A) because, well, you just don't do that kind of thing, and (B) because, well, they had to suffer the very unskilful pronunciation and grammatical forms that I was producing. But nevertheless, you know, it was something that I was determined to do. Because I wanted to show them that I was prepared to make a fool of myself in trying to speak Japanese in front of a lot of students, therefore I'm not going to laugh at them if they're feeling embarrassed about their English. That's not what I'm there for. I'm there to encourage and to help with communication skills. Stuff like that. So in these circumstances, one of the conversations I used to like to have is “What does religion mean to you?” And I would sometimes ask it in English and then ask it again in Japanese using the Japanese

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term *shūkyō*, which is the current dominant translation for religion. And the students, you know, quite often in these circumstances nobody will reply (30:00); there's just a deathly silence. But quite often I found if I was a bit persistent, they'd say, "Oh, religion is Christianity. It's nothing to do with me." (Laughs) Some would say Christianity and Buddhism are religion. And I'd say, well what about the [matsuri](#), the festivals? What about all your visits to the temple and the shrine? Are these . . .? What about the way that you pay respects to your ancestors in the home? Or these kinds of things? And they would just respond and say, "Oh no, no. That's not religion. That's our customs. That's Japanese customs. That's the way we live." So you see, the distinction between religion and what foreign and Japanese scholars of religion will describe as religious practices – for most people they're not. And I think that that was something that I needed to learn, you know.

DR: *Yes, I wonder how . . . I mean there's certainly a way of looking at everyday – what gets called "lived religion" or "vernacular" religion a lot of the time, now. Certainly, thinking about most of my kind-of relatives and friends growing up in a working class area in the highlands, that's mostly the way that they talk about religion as well. "Religion? Oh it's the wee frieze at the high kirk", or whatever. But going to speak to your gran at the grave or, you know, these kind-of ritual behaviours around twenty-first birthdays, or Christmastime, or Hogmanay, or whatever – they weren't really thought of as religion. But I can't help but think if there was a sort-of 1930's anthropologist in that situation he would be describing all of these as kind-of "primitive religious rituals".*

TF: Well, yes. Except that . . . basically "primitive", I don't think contemporaries would call them primitive.

DR: *No, no.*

TF: No. I know exactly what you mean. There's a whole tradition of making other people's practices look as though they're somehow backward, lower on the evolutionary scale, less sophisticated. But I think also there is the complication that there is a kind-of meta level, say the constitutional level, the level of constitutional, and the level of judiciary concerning what religion means. And this is basically adopted from Europe. And it's quite a long story but it involves talking about . . . In the mid-nineteenth century, the Americans were becoming very powerful, they were quite imperialistic. The United States of America, which had liberated people from the tyranny of a European monarch . . .

DR: *I want to pick that up at the start of the next interview. Because I don't think we've got time to do it justice now.*

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TF: No, I think it is a very long one that. Because I think we need to talk about the way in which religion became inscribed in the US constitution.

DR: *Absolutely. So we'll pick that one up there in the next episode. But for now, let's just . . . Whilst you were in Japan, you wrote *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. So tell us a little bit about the overall argument there. I mean, certainly reading that as . . . I was either towards the end of being an undergrad, or at the start of postgraduate studies. (35:00) It was the first sustained argument challenging religions, world religions, the phenomenological approach which had been so sort-of central to the way that they taught at Edinburgh. And so, just briefly sum up where you were when you wrote that monograph.*

TF: Well, as you say, I was in Japan. And it was the culmination of . . . I mean I'd been publishing about Japan during the '90s. For example, I was reading books on Japanese religion in English but written by Japanese scholars who had either written their contribution in English or it had been translated. But one thing that struck me. There was one particular volume which was quite authoritative. I mean, it had been published and financed under the auspices of the ministry of culture in Japan. And there were five or six professors who contributed special chapters to it: one on Japanese Buddhism, one on Japanese Shinto, one on Japanese Confucianism, one on Japanese nature religion, one on, sorry, folk religion, and one or two others. One on Christianity in Japan, I think. There are very few Christians in Japan. But what struck me about all of these writers was that (A) they were all specialising in a particular religion, or a particular religious tradition, which they set out to describe for the reader. But, at the same time, every single one of them said that, actually, this is a very artificial distinction. Because, really, you can't talk about Shinto without talking about Confucianism and Buddhism. And the same with the others. Because they're all . . . they're all part of our lives. We don't really choose between them. It's not as though "I'm a Shintoist, but not a Buddhist". And the idea that "I'm not a Confucianist" is difficult to swallow. The point is that there was a contradiction inherent in what they were saying. And it was the same contradiction that I'd encountered . . . well I'd encountered it in India in a particular way, but also in the definitional problems, in the degree that I did: that there was a disparity between what people were saying in one part of the text and what they were saying in another part. So my first article about Japan was published . . . I can't remember now . . . in the early nineties. Was it '93? '94? '95? And it was called [*Japanese Religion as Ritual Order*](#)

DR: 1993.

TF: 1993. Ok. And it was published I think, in [*Religion*](#). And I was trying to point out what I've just

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told you in that article. I called it *Japanese Religion as Ritual Order*, because I was trying to find a term which would give me some kind-of a base. And “ritual” seemed to be a very useful one. Because ritual . . . we can use the term ritual to describe either side of the binary. You know, you can have religious rituals and secular rituals. But rituals was a term which I hoped I would be able to use in order to avoid using this binary religion/secular. Because it didn't seem to me to work. So I looked at all the ways in which the Japanese ritualised their everyday lives, in all the institutions, in the household, in the schools, in the universities, in the corporations, in the small businesses, in the services. Every institutional practice is the ritual which constructs seniors and juniors, that's one of the things it does. It's imbued with respect language, and different levels of language. There is an issue about social space, so people distance themselves in a certain way. Bowing is an obvious example of the ritualization of everyday life (40:00). So I wanted to try and subvert this essentialising dichotomy – between religion on the one hand, and the rest of secular life on the other – and show that it's much more like a ritual continuum. And that went in very much to *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

DR: *For me, the most kind-of impactful realisation in it was the critique of phenomenology, the phenomenological method, as kind-of essentialist and maybe even crypto-theological. Together with the sort-of largest critique of the category as essentially . . . without that kind-of essence to it. Like, the term was essentially meaningless, unless it was referring to this sui generis kind-of essence. And that, for me, was the most impactful part of that argument. I don't know if that was central for you, but that was . . .*

TF: I think of course it is central, yes. I mean, one of the points of my argument was that religion is actually used to describe and classify so much that it becomes empty of any specific content. And then, if you look at the actual range of usages of the term religion, there's a religion of everything. And yet at the same time in this either/or essentialising binary with the non-religious secular. Now there's something very interesting there, that on the one hand you've got a category which can be used so widely that you're beginning to wonder: is anything not religion or religious? And on the other hand, it's held together in this essentially either/or binary. It's either religion or it's not religion – which gives it the appearance of having a very determinate and definitive reference. Do you see what I'm saying?

DR: *Yes, absolutely.*

TF: And it also raises the question about: if we can't define the religion side of the binary, then we can't find the limits of the secular side either. And my work in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* was

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very much about destabilising politics and society as the generic abstraction for sociology. And a lot of the stuff was aimed at Ninian Smart, but also much more widely. I mean, I discussed a lot of different theorists in *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. And I wanted to undermine these grand dichotomies. But as soon as you question the limits of the secular, then you're also questioning politics, or the idea of society, or the idea of culture.

DR: *And that's exactly where we're going to pick up in the next part of this interview. But, for now: thank you, Tim.*

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcription, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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